

# PARENT HEALTH BULLETIN



Pinellas County Health Department

Steps to a HealthierFL—Pinellas County

## Is My Child Overweight?

**B**MI, or Body Mass Index, uses a child's height and weight to estimate how much body fat he or she has. Doctors use BMI to determine the appropriate weight for a child. A child with a body mass index at or above the 95th percentile for age and sex is considered overweight. Once the BMI is determined, it can be plotted on a standard BMI chart. Your child will fall into one of four categories:

- **Underweight:** BMI below the 5th percentile
- **Normal weight:** BMI falls between the 5th and the 85th percentiles
- **At risk for overweight:** BMI between the 85th and 95th percentiles
- **Overweight:** BMI at or above 95th percentile

BMI is not a perfect measure of body fat and there are situations where BMI may be misleading. For example, a very muscular person may have a high BMI without being overweight (because extra muscle adds to a person's body weight - but not fatness). In addition, BMI may be difficult to interpret during puberty when kids are experiencing periods of rapid growth. It's important to remember that BMI is usually a good indicator - but is *not* a direct measurement - of body fat. These days, you may hear more about BMI. Doctors use BMI during routine check-ups and many school districts include BMI in their annual health assessments. Starting when your child is two years old, the doctor will probably determine his or her BMI at every routine checkup.

The doctor will likely plot this measurement on a chart compared to other children who are the same age. Since what is normal changes with age, doctors must plot children's BMI measurements on standard growth charts rather than using a universal normal range for BMI as is done with adults. They also use separate charts for boys and girls to account for differences in growth rates and amounts of body fat as the two genders mature. (A Child's BMI calculator can be found at <http://www.kidshealth.org>). The information is recorded in your child's medical record, and over several visits, the pattern of measurements allows the doctor to track your child's growth.

BMI is particularly helpful for identifying children and adolescents who are at risk for becoming significantly overweight as they get older. In older children and teens, there is a strong correlation between BMI and the amount of body fat. Therefore, those with high BMI readings—and probably high levels of fat—are most likely to have weight problems when they are older. If doctors can identify these at-risk children early, they can monitor their body fat more carefully and potentially prevent adult obesity through changes in eating and exercise habits.



## Overcoming Overweight and Obesity in Your Child

The key to keeping kids of all ages at a healthy weight is taking a whole-family approach. It's the "practice what you preach" mentality. Make eating and exercise a family affair. Get your children involved by letting them help you plan and prepare healthy meals, and take them along when you go grocery shopping, so they can learn how to make good food choices. Avoid falling into some common food/eating behavior traps:



- **Don't reward children for good behavior or try to stop bad behavior with sweets or treats.** Come up with other solutions to modify their behavior, such as rewarding them with attention (hugs, smiles, kisses) and playful activities.
- **Don't maintain a "clean-plate" policy.** Be aware of kids' hunger cues. Even babies who turn away from the bottle or breast send signals that they're full. If kids are satisfied, don't force them to continue eating. Reinforce the idea that they should only eat when they're hungry.
- **Don't talk about "bad foods" or completely eliminate all sweets and favorite snacks from overweight children's diets.** Children may rebel and overeat these forbidden foods outside the home or sneak them in on their own.

<http://www.kidshealth.org>

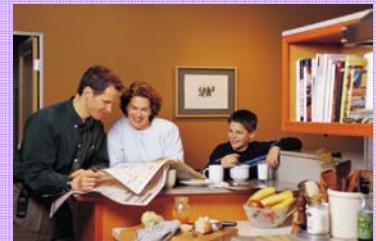
Here are some additional recommendations for children of all ages:

**Birth to age 1:** In addition to its many health benefits, breastfeeding may help prevent excessive weight gain. Though the exact mechanism is not known, breastfed babies are more able to control their own intake and follow their own internal hunger cues.

**Ages 2 to 6:** Start good habits early. Encourage kids' natural tendency to be active and offer children a variety of healthy foods. It may take 10 or more tries before a child will accept a new food, so don't give up.

**Ages 7 to 12:**

Encourage children to be physically active every day, whether it's an organized sports team or a pick-up game of soccer



during recess. Keep your kids active at home, too, through everyday activities like walking and playing in the yard. Let them be more involved in making good food choices.

**Ages 13 to 17:** Teens like fast-food, but try to steer them toward healthier choices like grilled chicken sandwiches, salads and smaller sizes. Encourage them to be active everyday. If they are not into organized sports, suggest intramural programs, fitness classes such as yoga or pilates or alternative sport like skateboarding, inline skating or mountain biking. Dancing is an excellent physical activity and there are software programs which appeal to teens that are designed around dance.



Funding for this newsletter was supported by Program Announcement 03135 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, or the U.S. Government.

For information about **Steps to a HealthierFL-Pinellas County** visit our website: [www.StepsFL.com](http://www.StepsFL.com) or call 2-1-1